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ABSTRACT

Intended for school administrators and teachers, this booklet describes ideas for improving communication between the school and hard-to-reach parents and the process used to obtain them. In the first section the four steps in the process of obtaining such ideas and information are outlined. These are: (1) arranging the meeting of representatives of parents and community members, (2) orienting the participants (purpose of meeting, procedures, rules for brainstorming), (3) conducting the brainstorming session, and (4) summarizing, reporting, and implementing the results. The next section presents ideas selected from brainstorming sessions with hard-to-reach parents. These ideas are divided into the categories of parents with which they are intended for use: disinterested/alienated, single, and limited English speaking. For each group of parents these types of ideas are presented: concerns relative to their children's school achievement, ways to improve communication with the parent, and ways the school can encourage the parent to work with his/her children on the basic skills. (YLB)

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REACHING THE HARD-TO-REACH PARENT

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Community Education Proven Practices II

REACHING THE HARD-TO-REACH PARENT

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Arizona Department of Education
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INTRODUCTION

School administrators and teachers encounter difficulty in communicating with some parents because of their particular life circumstances. Among those groups of parents which may be hard-to-reach are the disinterested/alienated, the limited English speaking and the single parent.

Through a series of meetings with representatives of these parent groups, ideas were collected for improving communication between the school and each group. These ideas and the process used to obtain them are described in the following pages.

Parents do want to be involved in the education of their children, but often feel helpless in knowing how to proceed. The traditional view of the family with a full-time homemaker available to come to the school at its convenience does not fit the lifestyle of these families. Other approaches are needed to provide them with information and to obtain their involvement.

This booklet is designed to help schools find alternative means of reaching the hard-to-reach parent.

THE PROCESS USED TO COLLECT IDEAS

School personnel may wish to use the procedures described below to obtain information on ways to improve communication between parents and the schools in their district.

Step 1. Arranging the Meeting

A meeting of six to ten representatives of parents and community members is arranged by the school administrator, community education director or teacher. Approximately 1½ - 2 hours is needed for the meeting. The chairs should be arranged in a circle or around a table. Ideally, a facilitator who is not directly connected with the school should lead the meeting.

Step 2. Orienting the Participants

After introductions of the participants have been made, the facilitator uses a flip chart or overhead projector to present the following information:

A. Purpose of meeting

1. To collect ideas on how to improve the communication between schools and parents.
2. To share ideas on how the school can help parents work with their children in learning the basic skills.

B. Procedure

1. Brainstorm for ideas.
2. List all ideas on newsprint. Identify two or three items for each question which look most promising.
3. Summarize ideas collected and distribute to meeting participants for additional comments.
4. Select one or two ideas to implement.
5. Evaluate results and report back to meeting participants.

6. Reconvene group to consider additional ideas.

C. Rules for Brainstorming

1. List every idea.
2. Do not discuss or criticize ideas at this time.
3. Do not judge or comment on ideas yet.
4. It is O.K. to repeat ideas.
5. Give as many ideas as possible.
6. Hitchhike on others' ideas.
7. Combine ideas.
8. Take an old idea - give it a new twist.
9. Use part of an idea in a different way.

Step 3. Conducting the Brainstorming Session

The facilitator needs to write down every idea without editing, if possible. The questions need to be on large pieces of paper or handouts, so they are constantly visible to the group.

Suggested questions for brainstorming are:

- What are concerns of this group of parents relative to their children's school achievement?
- How can the school best communicate with this group of parents?
- How can the school assist parents in helping their children learn the basic skills?

Step 4. Summarizing, Reporting and Implementing the Results

The facilitator or person who convened the meeting summarizes the ideas collected and sends them to the meeting participants. Ideas are selected for implementation. The results are evaluated, and additional ideas are collected.

THE IDEAS COLLECTED

On the following pages are ideas selected from "brain-storming" sessions with representatives of disinterested/ alienated parents, single parents and limited English speaking parents. School administrators and teachers are urged to use these ideas as a starting point for improving communication with parents.

Disinterested/Alienated Parents

The concerns relative to their children's school achievement of this group of parents are that:

- their children do not create any behavior problems at school. Their major emphasis is not on grades.
- all the teaching is left to the school - the parents feel they have nothing to contribute.
- some teachers in the upper grades seem to discourage the parents from coming to school.
- they hear only negatives about their children when they do come to school.

Communication with the disinterested/alienated parent can be improved by:

- developing networks of parents with children in the same class or grade.
- involving their children in a program such as art, music, drama. Hold the program early in the evening so they may bring all their children.
- having home visits by the school staff for people who don't come to school.
- giving the parents positive "strokes" when they do come to school.
- arranging meetings of parents and teachers around social events such as potlucks and picnics.
- using the power of the local media.
- setting up booths of information about the school in shopping malls.

- having a program for each grade level with the child participating. Distribute the basic skills charts or other information which parents can use to help their children learn.

The school can encourage the disinterested/alienated parent to work with their children on the basic skills by:

- telling the parents it is "O.K." for them to teach their child. Some parents may need "permission" to do so.
- giving parents ideas on what they can do to help their children. On home visits, show parents ways they can help their child learn.
- finding ways parents can help their child learn basic skills as they go about their regular routines.
- encouraging parents to listen to their children.
- having information in a compact way - so it can be stuck on a refrigerator, bulletin board, door.
- talking with parents about how to help their child watch TV, how to evaluate what they see.
- continuing home visits in the upper elementary grades. Let parents know what is happening at school.

SINGLE PARENTS

The concerns of single parents relative to their child's school achievements are:

- lack of time to spend with the child as result of trying to fill several roles.
- not having another adult with which to discuss ideas and/or problems.
- the level of discipline in the classroom. Is there a learning atmosphere? Does the school reinforce the moral values of the home and church?
- the teacher's awareness and sympathetic understanding of the child's problems at home before and after the divorce.

School personnel can improve communication with single parents by:

- reaching them through single parent group meetings, church groups for Singles, Parents Without Partners, Big Brothers, Big Sisters.
- holding parent-teacher conferences in the evenings. Have on-going explanation of school programs such as basic skills in the cafetorium at the same time. Serve refreshments.
- having a place on school registration forms or health cards to indicate if the parent has a different last name than the child. This is needed to get in touch with the parent in case of illness or injury.
- finding ways to keep the non-custodial parent informed relative to the child's school activities and progress.
- distributing information to senior citizens to pass on to their children who may be single parents.
- developing flyers to be placed on bulletin boards in business and industry for employees.
- telephoning the parent periodically to inform him/her of the child's progress.

- notifying the parent when the child was disciplined, and what action was taken so parents reinforce the action or follow up on it.

The schools can assist single parents in helping their children learn the basic skills by:

- developing a brief audiovisual presentation of parents helping their children with basic skills to be shown at PTA meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and school programs.
- working with the community's large employers to conduct workshops during lunch for employees on helping children learn basic skills.
- using a cartoon idea - recipe book approach in materials for parents.
- having workshops for parents on time management skills.
- training a parent to visit homes or conduct meetings with parents on how to help children with basic skills. Provide babysitting services for parent meetings.
- helping parents to understand they are teachers of their children, too.
- providing rewards which parents can give to their children for mastery of skills.
- informing parents right away when the child is having difficulty in a subject area - before the report cards come out.

Limited English-Speaking Parent

Concerns of limited English-speaking parents relative to their children's school achievement are that:

- the child may not understand what the teacher is saying.
- the teacher may not realize it takes longer for the child to learn because the child doesn't understand the language.
- the child ask the teacher for help when he/she doesn't understand.
- the teacher may not understand what the child is saying.
- the teacher has a positive attitude toward bilingual students.
- the teacher is willing to communicate with the parent if the child is having problems.
- the child feels comfortable with the teacher.
- the teacher is willing to make more than one explanation to the child, and to give enough time to help the child understand.
- the teacher knows alternatives or sources of help to assist the child.
- the teachers really care about the students at the high school, as well as elementary, level.

Communication with limited English-speaking parents can be improved by:

- holding meetings or conferences with parents.
- having a translator available for limited English-speaking parents.
- sending information home written in the language of the parents.
- having the parents volunteer in the classroom.
- putting progress reports in a language the parent can understand.
- communicating with the parents if there is a problem with the child.
- trying to solve problems, rather than ignoring them.
- having someone to answer the school telephone who speaks the language of the limited-English speaking parents.
- administrators recognizing parents visiting the school and making them feel welcome.

Limited English-speaking parents can be assisted in helping their children learn the Basic Skills by:

- having available books and other materials which the parents can borrow.
- letting the parents know what is being taught and the method the teacher is using.
- having workshops for parents on how they can help their children learn.
- sending home explanations and forms to help the child with homework.
- praising and recognizing <u>all</u> children when they do well.

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